

This book reopens the question of Rousseau's influence on the French Revolution and on English Romanticism, by examining the relationship between his confessional writings and his political theory. Gregory Dart argues that by looking at the way in which Rousseau's writings were mediated by the speeches and actions of the French Jacobin statesman Maximilien Robespierre, we can gain a clearer and more concrete sense of the legacy he left to English writers. He shows how the writings of William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, William Wordsworth and William Hazlitt rehearse and reflect upon the Jacobin tradition in the aftermath of the French revolutionary Terror.

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*Rousseau, Robespierre and English  
Romanticism*

GREGORY DART



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'To my father & mother Edward and Jean,  
and my two sisters Leah and Katie.'



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CHAPTER I

*Despotism of liberty: Robespierre and the  
illusion of politics*

Concerning the French, I wish Buonaparte had stayed in Egypt, and that Robespierre had guillotined Sieyès. These cursed complex governments are good for nothing, and will ever be in the hands of intriguers. The Jacobins were the men; and one house of representatives, lodging the executive in committees, the plain and common system of government. The cause of republicanism is over, and it is now only a struggle for dominion. There wanted a Lycurgus<sup>1</sup> after Robespierre, a man loved for his virtue, and bold, and inflexible, and who should have levelled the property of France, and then would the Republic have been immortal, and the world must have been revolutionised by example.<sup>2</sup>

I

At the end of a letter to Samuel Taylor Coleridge of 23 December 1799, which was written immediately after Napoleon Bonaparte's *coup d'état* of 18 Brumaire, the young republican poet Robert Southey expressed sentiments which went directly against the grain of history. Not only did he distance himself from the counter-revolutionary consensus that was growing in England at this time, he also rejected the claims of Bonaparte and Emmanuel Sieyès that the French Constitution of 1799 represented the final fulfilment of the revolutionary ideal.<sup>3</sup> In his impatience with contemporary politics on either side of the Channel, Southey harked back to the Jacobin phase of the French Revolution, the period lasting from 1792 to 1794 during which the First Republic had been governed according to uncompromisingly egalitarian principles. As is well known, this phase was to culminate in Maximilien Robespierre's infamous 'Reign of Terror', which resulted in the imprisonment and execution of many thousands of people. By 1799 fewer and fewer English radicals still looked to France as the land of liberty and promise, and an even smaller number were concerned to rehabilitate Robespierre's reputation. How

then do we explain Southey's belated enthusiasm for neo-Spartan principles? To what extent was it shared by other radical writers of the period? And how significant is it to an understanding of English Romanticism in general?

By the later 1790s the leading propagandists of the English counter-revolution were committed to vilifying Robespierist Jacobinism. Above and beyond that, however, they were also keen to collapse the differences between the various phases of the Revolution. In one of the first extended historical accounts of the period, a two-volume set of *Biographical Memoirs of the French Revolution* (1799), John Adolphus was to represent it as a uniformly disastrous phenomenon, rehearsing the charge that had been made earlier and even more forcefully by Edmund Burke in his *Letters on the Regicide Peace* of 1794–5. And as time went on not only staunch loyalists like Adolphus and Burke, but also former radicals like Samuel Taylor Coleridge came to endorse this version of events. Ten years after receiving the letter quoted above, Coleridge was striving to show the ideological unity of the French Revolution by arguing that philosophical radicalism, Robespierist Jacobinism and Bonapartism were all products of the misguided rationalism of the French Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, in order to reject French revolutionary principles wholesale, it was necessary to argue that they made a whole. Southey's letter ought to remind us, however, not to accept the counter-revolutionary narrative unquestioningly. It alerts us to the fact that it was actually under construction during this period, and that there were still other versions of revolutionary history available during the early 1800s. Southey describes Jacobinism in a way that clearly identifies it as a tradition of political primitivism, a 'plain and common system of government' to be contrasted with the 'cursed complex' constitution of the new Bonapartist regime. The would-be dictator Napoleon Bonaparte and the liberal constitutionalist Emmanuel Sieyès are both condemned for introducing a set of legislative arrangements designed to stanch individual freedom and stifle the exercise of virtue. The Jacobins, by contrast, are celebrated for their simplicity and austerity, their neo-Spartan enthusiasm for moral regeneration and their anti-modern mistrust of private property. In this way Southey establishes a distinction between primitive simplicity and modern complexity, both of which were championed at different times during the legislative history of the Revolution, but only one of which, in his eyes, was a proper expression of the revolutionary ideal.

In wishing that there had been a 'Lycurgus after Robespierre' to bring

about a republic of true liberty and equality, Southey comes close to repeating the sentiments he had expressed five years earlier in a letter following hard upon news of the Thermidorean conspiracy, where he had described Robespierre as a 'benefactor of mankind' whose death was to be lamented as 'the greatest misfortune Europe could have sustained'. Despite or perhaps even because of his 'great bad actions' he was seen as the modern incarnation of the ancient legislator, a man whose courageous pursuit of moral regeneration had been 'sacrificed to the despair of fools and cowards'.<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, Southey did not always sustain this attitude, briefly succumbing to the appeal of Thermidoreanism, which sought to demonise the Jacobin leader as a means of recuperating the Revolution's 'beau idéal'. Nevertheless, for all its fitfulness, the unexpected survival of Southey's Robespierrism through years of political disappointment and disillusionment invites us to question modern assumptions about the decline of radical enthusiasm among the English radical intelligentsia in the later 1790s. According to most commentators, figures such as Southey, Wordsworth and Coleridge moved slowly but surely away from radical politics in the aftermath of the Terror, so that from 1794 onwards they were taking gradual steps on the road to conservatism.<sup>6</sup> But Southey's letters suggest that this political trajectory may have been more eccentric and unstable than the orthodox account will allow, prone to curious revolutions of thought and sudden resurrections of feeling. It also suggests that the leading writers of the English Romantic movement may have had a deeper investment in the political psychology of revolutionary republicanism than has been generally recognised by literary history, much of which has interpreted the radicalism of figures such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey almost entirely in terms of English traditions of civic humanism and/or radical dissent.<sup>7</sup>

In drawing attention to the crisis of representation that was provoked by the revolution, to the contemporary struggle to give this violent and unpredictable phenomenon some kind of narrative form, Ronald Paulson's *Representations of Revolution* was a significant contribution to the literary history of the 1790s. But in drawing such a hard and fast distinction between French and English versions of the revolutionary 'plot', Paulson tends to neglect the interplay of mutual influence. He suggests that the French political class wanted to see the Revolution as a neo-classical drama, or a 'primitivist' romance, but that the unruliness of its progress often made such generic straitjackets woefully inadequate.

Then he goes on to argue that the English, by contrast, tried to make sense of events in France by filtering them through the literary categories of sentimental fiction, gothic drama and grotesque farce.<sup>8</sup> Since Paulson, a number of critics have sought to fill in the details of his highly suggestive but necessarily rather general account.<sup>9</sup> But there has been no serious attempt to argue for the influence of French revolutionary forms and contexts upon English literary practice. This is not merely a question of showing that figures such as Wordsworth, Godwin, Wollstonecraft and Hazlitt were well versed in the nice distinctions in French politics, but of arguing that the literary dynamics of their work can only be understood with reference to the complex patterns of plot and counter-plot, denunciation and confession that we find in French republicanism. The fact that Southey felt 'the cause of republicanism' to be over in 1799 did not prevent him from fantasising a new Lycurgus. Similarly, in a famous passage on the French Revolution from Book x of *The Prelude* of 1805, William Wordsworth admitted to retaining a 'Creed which ten years have not annull'd' that 'the virtue of one paramount mind / Would have . . . clear'd a passage for just government, / And left a solid birthright to the State, / Redeem'd according to example given / By ancient Lawgivers'.<sup>10</sup> In texts such as this the ideology of Jacobinism survived neither as an allegiance to the French nation as such, nor even as the literary remains of a legislative programme, but as a complex of representational strategies, a characteristic mode of apprehending the relationship between politics and society.

Before addressing the influence of 'Jacobinism' upon English Romantic writing, however, it is necessary to obtain a clearer sense of what we mean by this term. It is important to differentiate 'Jacobin primitivism' from the other forms of Jacobinism to which the Revolution gave rise, forms such as the liberal theory of 'complex government' referred to by Southey. The first two chapters of this book will be centrally concerned to explore this phenomenon. For it is my contention that it is only by distinguishing between the two main bodies of political theory that went into the making of revolutionary 'Jacobinism',<sup>11</sup> bourgeois liberalism on the one hand, and Rousseauvian civic humanism on the other – a theoretical distinction that Robespierre tried to transform into a practical difference between the Jacobins and the Gironde – that we can truly understand the political psychology of French middle-class republicanism, its fratricidal tensions, its metaphysic of morals, and its displacements of its own class bias.

## II

In the late 1780s the worsening financial crisis in the French government fuelled an increasingly widespread and vociferous enthusiasm for economic and political reform. As the crisis reached its height, Louis XVI agreed to reconvene the Estates General in order that a broad consensus could be reached on the economic and fiscal measures required to remedy the situation. Emmanuel Sieyès's celebrated pamphlet *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état?* was prompted by the king's pronouncement that the three Estates should meet and vote separately, as they had done in 1614, and not as a unified body, as most reformers had hoped. Daringly, Sieyès proposed a single national government by the commoners of the Third Estate, considering that this was the only way to banish the feudalism and corporatism which had stifled French life. Drawing heavily on the writings of Turgot, Quesnay and the Enlightenment physiocrats, he argued for a system of representative government in which private persons would be able to gather together to assist in the formation of a truly public authority while safeguarding the freedom of private commerce.<sup>12</sup> In his discussion of the public good and its relation to private concerns, Sieyès unashamedly employed the language of the joint-stock company, indicating the inextricable link which existed at this time between liberal notions of political reform and the logic of laissez-faire capitalism. In his eyes, the individual had a 'share' in the general good, so it was in his own private interest to make a 'useful alliance' with it.

According to Sieyès, the central impediment to the development of this enabling separation of public and private, was corporate privilege, the system of monopolies and exemptions which characterised eighteenth-century French society. Of all these corporate interests, the nobility was widely considered to be the largest and the most unjustified. Having been divested *as a body* of its former public role during the early modern period, by the mid-1700s the French aristocracy had become largely unrelated to the public authority of the state, preserving only the vestiges of its former 'publicness', the theatrical show of privileges, titles and trappings attacked by Rousseau in his *Lettre à d'Alembert* of 1758. Once brought under public scrutiny, Sieyès believed that the exclusive principle of aristocracy could not hope to remain intact, for it was 'alien' to the nation, 'first of all on principle, since its brief does not derive from the people, secondly on account of its purpose, since it consists in the defence not of the general but of the particular interest'.<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, as he developed his critique, Sieyès was not content merely to identify the nobility as an expensive and dysfunctional monopoly (42–3), he was also driven to depict it as an evil sickness gnawing away at the heart of a virtuous nation (177). And in emphasising his opposition to feudal privilege, he regularly slipped from the vocabulary of interest employed by the physiocrats into the republican discourse of civic virtue that had been developed by Rousseau.<sup>14</sup>

While aristocrats will speak of their honour and keep watch over their interest, the Third Estate, which is to say, the Nation, will develop its virtue, because if corporate interest is egotism, the national interest is virtue. (153)

Amid the excitement of 1789 the principles of Rousseauvian civic humanism and bourgeois liberalism were frequently juxtaposed by the revolutionary bourgeoisie, with the result that a quintessentially metaphysical language of public virtue was often dovetailed and confused with a fundamentally commercial language of shared interest. However, as the Revolution progressed, the fundamental differences that existed between these two discourses began to manifest themselves, and this was instrumental in creating the fratricidal tension which came to characterise middle-class French Jacobinism. But in order to be able to understand the historical and political consequences of this ideological confusion, it is first of all necessary to analyse its nature. With this in mind, I shall now seek to contrast Rousseau's politics of the will with the politics of interest that had been developed by the physiocrats.

## III

In his *Discours sur les Sciences et les Arts* of 1750, Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed his celebrated critique of the progress of civilisation. He considered that contemporary civilisation was corrupting the pursuit of knowledge; that the development of reason was being inhibited by the demands and constraints of patronage, salon culture and the literary market-place; and that philosophy was being turned into an aristocratic ornament, a kind of luxury commodity to be circulated and exchanged like the latest fashion. His proposed remedy was for the king himself to rescue the most enlightened of his subjects from the corruptions of the court by appointing them as his independent advisers.<sup>15</sup> This gesture was very much a response to the circumstances arising from the radical separation of the French monarchical state from the private realm of civil society during the ancien régime. Debarred from a role in the

political realm of legislation and administration, philosophy had been left to shift for itself in the private realm of the market-place and aristocratic patronage. Only if philosophers could free themselves from the corrupting circumstances of economic dependence, Rousseau argued, could they return to the pursuit of virtue and reason. In this, his first extended analysis of the problems besetting modern societies, he was not far from the model of enlightened absolutism that was favoured by the physiocrats. In later works, however, Rousseau grew rather more sceptical of the project of Enlightenment, whether conducted from within the bourgeois public sphere in the private realm of letters, or through the machinery of the monarchical state. So much so, indeed, that he gradually came to consider the productions of former colleagues and friends such as Denis Diderot, Claude Helvétius and Baron Holbach as tending to naturalise the injustices and prejudices of modern society rather than resist them. He became increasingly sceptical of the value of philosophical and literary debate as a vehicle for political change, and increasingly committed to the notion of an unreflective consensus as the sovereign principle of legislation.

In the course of his examination of the characteristics of a legitimate state in the *Contrat Social* of 1762, Rousseau developed a theory of civil liberty that would allow each individual to enjoy the security afforded by civil society without renouncing all claim to the liberty that was his natural birthright. He did this by introducing a form of citizenship in which the individual would identify himself with the general will of the whole community, renouncing all his natural rights in order to receive them back on a political basis. According to this view of things, each man would give himself to no one in giving himself to all. The general will would never be oppressive or unjust, in Rousseau's analysis, since all the conditions would be the same for everyone, so that no single person would have any interest in making them burdensome for others.<sup>16</sup> In his mind, the achievement of moral liberty through political activity was more important than the freedom to pursue one's private interests: 'the mere impulse of appetite is slavery', he wrote, in what amounted to a paradoxical critique of Lockean liberalism, 'while obedience to a law which one prescribes to oneself is liberty'.<sup>17</sup>

Famously, Rousseau was adamant that the general will could not *act*: it was a legislative power, not an executive one. Thus it needed a body of ministers to implement its laws, a body that would have to be periodically vetted by the sovereign, and replaced at regular intervals to prevent it from being corrupted by power. In favour of an elected executive,

Rousseau was nevertheless resistant to the notion of an elected legislature, and implacably opposed to the notion that the latter could ever possess sovereignty, for according to him sovereignty could only ever rest with the nation. 'Every law which the people has not ratified in person', he wrote, 'is null; it is not a law'.<sup>18</sup> Unable to suggest ways in which this sovereignty might express itself in a large state such as France, Rousseau escaped from this conceptual difficulty by throwing down a set of rhetorical challenges to his reader. He implied that the inability of the present generation to imagine how an entire people could be assembled to legislate in the national interest was itself a sign of the alienation of civilised man: 'You sacrifice more for profit than for liberty', he declared to his readers, 'and fear slavery less than poverty.'<sup>19</sup>

The extent to which Rousseau did not offer a practical programme for the setting up of a republican state has often been noted. Many critics and political historians have found it extremely abstract in comparison with other seminal texts in the history of political theory. Yet it has not perhaps been sufficiently noticed that it is precisely at those moments when practical problems begin to crowd in, that Rousseau actively exploits the modern difficulty of imagining true citizenship. For in certain respects, the deliberately paradoxical style of the *Contrat Social* seems expressly designed to force each reader to discover for himself the extent of his own corruption:

In a well-ordered city every man flies to the assemblies: under a bad government no one cares to stir a step to get to them, because no one is interested in what happens there, because it is foreseen that the general will shall not prevail, and lastly because domestic cares are all-absorbing . . . As soon as any man asks *What does it matter to me?* the State may be given up for lost.<sup>20</sup>

In this startling example of negative thinking, Rousseau defines the public good almost exclusively in terms of the private obstacles to be surmounted in the course of its pursuit. Crucially, he imagined public opinion as a form of general sentiment anterior to critical debate, 'more a consensus of hearts than of arguments', as Jürgen Habermas has pointed out,<sup>21</sup> inviting an entire generation of readers to rediscover within themselves an enthusiasm for civic virtue by goading them to disprove his pessimistic assessment of them.

This stands in sharp contrast to the model of municipal government promulgated by the physiocrats. For example, in his *Mémoire sur les municipalités* of 1775 Anne Robert Jacques Turgot had proposed a system in which village assemblies representing local property interests would

control their own affairs while at the same time sending delegates to county assemblies to address larger questions of policy. These county assemblies would, in their turn, elect deputies to represent them at regional and then at national level, thus building up a highly organised consultative network based on the balancing of interests. And by this means, a national network of political discussion would be established, involving propertied citizens at every level, out of which a truly public opinion would be formed.

Now as is quite evident, this model differed greatly from Rousseau's conception of the ideal form of political life, which drew heavily on the democratic tradition of the ancient republics of Greece. For he considered that full political rights should be accorded to all the men of a nation, irrespective of their wealth, and should express itself in the form of a direct participation in the process of legislation. In place of Turgot's property principle, he introduced a strongly affective element into the discourse of politics, considering an enthusiasm for the public good the only necessary qualification for citizenship. Moreover, to his mind, the true general will of a nation was not an aggregate or critical synthesis of its individual wills – 'a will of all' as in Turgot – it was a metaphysical principle, a form of aspiration towards the public good that necessitated a complete transcendence of private interests. Thus it was that by locating political virtue in the hearts of men rather than in the ownership of property, Rousseau effectively succeeded in reworking ancient civic humanism into a politics of sensibility.

In the English civic humanist tradition of the eighteenth century the independent landed aristocrat remained the type of the free citizen, his landed wealth supposedly providing him with a permanent interest in the wealth of his country as well as a moral bulwark against the corrupting influence of credit and commerce.<sup>22</sup> In France, however, the perpetuation of feudal privileges and the declining public role of the nobility during the course of the 1700s made it less easy for the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie to regard the abstract figure of the aristocrat as the model of disinterested virtue. It was not surprising, therefore, that in his search for a prototype of the free and independent man Rousseau, like Montesquieu before him, was to look to distant models, celebrating the legislators of seventeenth-century Geneva and fifth-century Greece. Nor was it surprising that he should have found it necessary to fudge the crucial question of the relationship between land and civic virtue, continually invoking the patriotic zeal of the Spartans and Athenians, and emphasising their fervent local attachments, while consistently under-

playing the extent to which they too had seen property as the absolute foundation of politics.

Given its appeal beyond the borders of France in the revolutionary period, it is important to emphasise the truly paradoxical nature of Rousseau's civic humanism. On the one hand the *Contrat Social* attached great importance to patriotism and local tradition as a means of cementing national unity, but it also presumed that it was possible to generate 'primitive' republican virtue *ab initio* from a purely theoretical model. In this respect it was both a product of, and a resistance to the 'travelling theory' of the French Enlightenment.<sup>23</sup> Whereas the new social science of Turgot and Claude-Adrien Helvétius was truly cosmopolitan in nature, proposing a rational re-organisation of government and the law which was not subject to space or time, in much of Rousseau's writing good government was always to be sensitive to local conditions, with the constitution of a country emerging from the autochthonous customs of its people.<sup>24</sup> Oddly enough, therefore, the *Contrat Social* represented a curious blend of the ancient and modern traditions, offering a surprisingly cosmopolitan rendering of the 'localist' ideal. Within its pages its author supplied a theoretical model for the regeneration of a *polis*, but without suggesting how it might have to be adapted to fit specific contemporary circumstances.<sup>25</sup> In this way, as Allan Bloom has recently reiterated, 'Rousseau introduced the taste for the small, virtuous community into the modern movement towards freedom and equality',<sup>26</sup> effectively encouraging the revolutionary fantasy that it might be possible to reinvent a modern nation like France or England in the likeness of a city-state.

## IV

Given his solid grounding in physiocratic theory, why, then, did the Abbé Sieyès choose to supplement his fundamentally liberal theory of government with the dangerous rhetoric of Rousseauvian republicanism? According to Keith Michael Baker, he did so because it was the readiest means of forestalling the crisis of representation which was threatened by the proposed revolt of the Third Estate.<sup>27</sup> Without a tradition of parliamentary government, the French monarchical state as it stood in 1789 was peculiarly ill-equipped to make the transition from an absolute monarchy to a modern liberal democracy, primarily because its constitution recognised no sovereign principle apart from the king. Of course, there were occasional assemblies like the aristocratic *parlements* and the

Estates General, whose purpose was to petition the king on behalf of various sections of his people, but they did so purely as *mandataires* and not as *representatives*. For according to the neo-Hobbesian theory by which France was governed, the *king* was the sole sovereign principle of the nation, and thus he alone was capable of *representing* it.

This is not to say that there were not theories of representative government in circulation during the late 1780s. On the contrary, a current of thought running from Honoré Gabriel Riquet Mirabeau and Turgot through to François Quesnay and the *physiocrats* had succeeded in developing a number of different proposals for a system of national representation. The problem was that this body of theory had conceived of representation almost entirely in administrative and economic terms, it left the tricky question of political sovereignty entirely untouched. Hence Sieyès's decision to make use of the *Contrat Social* in his *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état?* was almost certainly motivated by the realisation that Rousseau's theory of popular sovereignty provided one of the only means of justifying the proposed rebellion of the Third Estate against the Estates General.<sup>28</sup> In his celebrated treatise, Rousseau had made a point of insisting upon the absolute and inalienable sovereignty of the general will. A monarch might be employed as an executive minister of a nation, he acknowledged, but it was a dangerous mistake to imagine that he could ever possess sovereignty. Moreover, it was absolutely impossible, according to Rousseau, that a nation could ever be bound against its will to a particular constitution, because it was itself the primary legislative principle of the state, the origin and cause of all law and government. It is not surprising, therefore, that Sieyès should have been keen to employ this concept of popular sovereignty during the constitutional crisis of 1789, for it allowed him to recommend the transformation of the Third Estate into a new national assembly as an example of the national will reaffirming its sovereign power over and above a series of unjust laws and antiquated conventions. The only sticking-point was that, while Rousseau was very useful to Sieyès on the question of sovereignty, he was less than helpful on the matter of representation. For there was, as we have seen, a profound mistrust of representative government at the heart of Rousseau's political theory, and indeed of any principle of political deputation that went beyond the old monarchical principle of the 'binding mandate'. Hence the virtuosic blending of two fundamentally incompatible political discourses – a politics based on property and interest, and one based on popular sovereignty – that Sieyès was forced to undertake, a blending which was,

initially at least, highly successful, in the sense that it played a major part in actually bringing the constitutional revolution of 1789 into being, but which was ultimately, however, quite radically unstable, in that it became a source of increasing political tension as time went on, and the conflict between representative government and civic virtue began to make itself felt.

And so, as we have seen, the distinctive relationship that existed between the different 'Estates' in eighteenth-century France rendered it difficult for the bourgeois revolutionaries of 1789 to develop their critique of the culture of corporatism and protectionism which had brought the nation to the very brink of bankruptcy without launching into an attack on the fundamental principle of aristocracy. And this, in turn, played a part in inhibiting the formation of an English-style coalition of the propertied élite during the constitutional period of the Revolution. Hence bourgeois revolutionaries like Sieyès and Mirabeau found themselves rapidly impelled to ally themselves with 'the people', employing the vocabulary of popular sovereignty which had been developed by Rousseau and his followers in an attempt to harness the insurrectionary energy of the *sans-culottes* in the service of their cause. Thus in many of the pamphlets of the constitutional period an essentially liberal commitment to property, law and freedom from state interference was dangerously supplemented by the language of ancient democracy.

This served to render the Revolution radical from the beginning, according the popular discontents and disturbances of the period a political validity and significance they might not otherwise have possessed. Moreover, the leading members of the Constituent Assembly succeeded in politicising the urban *sans-culottes* without ever being prepared to placate them, promising liberty, equality and fraternity while really only being concerned to pursue a peculiarly modern, highly limited and inescapably bourgeois notion of freedom. They may have been keen to invoke the principle of popular sovereignty in 1789–90, but the Constitution they finally produced in 1791 contained a property qualification which effectively barred huge swathes of the population from active citizenship.<sup>29</sup> Having pandered to the economic and political aspirations of the working classes, and having allowed, and in many cases encouraged, the growth of a network of political clubs and pressure groups in the capital, ultimately they reneged on their political promises. Such hypocrisy was always likely to incite popular resentment and violence. And indeed it was in this way that the Frankenstein of bourgeois politics encouraged the wrath of its 'creature' the Paris mob.

In this context, tensions began to develop between those bourgeois revolutionaries who believed themselves to be genuinely committed to Rousseau's democratic ideal, and those suspected of merely paying lip-service to its principles. In the years following 1791, during which the Revolution was increasingly buffeted by acute financial crisis, foreign invasion and civil war, the Jacobins emerged as the faction seemingly most committed to the principle of popular sovereignty, striving to distinguish themselves from what they considered to be the hypocritical republicanism of the Girondins. In the autumn of 1792 Maximilien Robespierre, one of the radical leaders of the Jacobin club and a deputy in the newly formed National Convention, was moved to criticise the room in the Tuileries that had been proposed as the site for the new national assembly on account of the diminutive size of the public gallery:

The entire nation has the right to know of the conduct of its representatives. It would be desirable, if it were possible, that the representative assembly should deliberate in the presence of all Frenchmen. The meeting place of the legislative body should be a grand and majestic edifice, open to twelve thousand spectators. Under the eyes of such a huge number of witnesses, neither corruption nor intrigue nor treachery would dare to show themselves, the general will alone would be heeded, the voice of reason and the public interest would have sole audience.<sup>30</sup>

Siding with Rousseau against the physiocrats, Robespierre saw 'public opinion' in terms of a single 'voice of reason' expressing itself spontaneously and unreflectively; he did not represent it as a product of rational-critical debate. Sharing the former's mistrust of the principle of representation, he wanted the new assembly hall of the republic to be a utopian realm of direct democracy, a room in which a large number of citizen-spectators could gather to supervise the workings of the legislative body, considering that no intrigue or faction could survive in such a powerful vessel of the 'general will'. A product of the general enthusiasm for transparency which had been a leading characteristic of revolutionary politics since 1789, there was nevertheless something almost pathological about Robespierre's desire for openness, for increasingly after 1791 it contained within it a paranoid suspicion of opacity, an irrational mistrust of any individual or corporate body resisting the searchlight of the state. Fuelled by the fantasy of reinventing France as an ancient democracy, he decided to dispense with what liberal thinkers such as Sieyès and Turgot had considered to be the enabling reciprocity of the public and the private sphere by seeking to render everything

subject to public scrutiny. And finally this developed into an increasing tendency to see private gatherings of any kind as part of an active and malevolent 'aristocratic' conspiracy against the war-torn republic of France.<sup>31</sup> It was entirely characteristic, then, that when he ultimately gained real power in 1793 as a member of one of the executive committees of the National Convention, his commitment to popular sovereignty manifested itself in terms of a terrifying war of public authority upon the very principle of private life.

## v

Over the last twenty years there has been an ongoing battle within the field of revolutionary historiography concerning the issue of whether the descent of the French Revolution into bloodshed and terror in 1792–4 was a historical accident – the product of a chaotic confluence of historical circumstances – or whether it was the logical outcome of the political ideology developed by the revolutionaries themselves. Where revisionary historians such as François Furet and Simon Schama have argued that the widespread violence of the period was the inevitable consequence of the demand for bloodshed encoded within the 'revolutionary catechism', some commentators, such as the post-marxist historian Gwynne Lewis, have tried to argue that the Terror of 1793–4 should be seen as an essentially reactionary measure, a desperate attempt to cope with the twin threat posed by the counter-revolution and popular politics.<sup>32</sup> One could argue, however, that this is something of a false opposition, since these two different approaches are by no means incompatible, either theoretically or practically. Indeed, as Lewis points out, it is actually possible to see them as standing in some kind of dialectical relation to one another, the product of a continuing but by no means necessary opposition in the field of historical studies between social history and cultural history. In this study, therefore, I shall not be seeking to choose between these two explanatory models, but rather to acknowledge what is powerful and compelling in each, to highlight the adverse circumstances out of which the ideology of the Terror might have been seen to emerge, while also acknowledging the fatal principle at the heart of revolutionary discourse, its inescapable dynamic of fraternity and fratricide.

Robespierre's response to the subsistence crisis of 1792–3 provides a good example of the way in which the 'revolutionary catechism' was to develop under the Jacobins. It came at a time when inflation had risen



1. Sketch of Robespierre (1794), by Gérard, musée Carnavelet, Paris. The text underneath reads: 'green eyes, pale complexion, green striped nankeen jacket, blue waistcoat with blue stripes, white cravate striped with red (sketch from the life at a sitting of the Convention)'.

to such a height that suppliers of goods and services, such as farmers, merchants and grocers, became increasingly reluctant to part with their assets. This caused prices to rise still further, setting off violent popular agitation and widespread allegations of hoarding. In response to this situation, Girondins such as Jean Marie Roland de la Platière and Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas de Caritat Condorcet remained committed to the principle of free trade. But as the pressure brought to bear upon the National Convention by the popular movement increased, Robespierre was eventually moved to denounce the way in which the policy of *laissez-faire* was being exploited by the *cupidité homicide* of the commercial interest.

In a move that was at once revolutionary and thoroughly anti-modern, he subordinated the right of property to the right of subsistence:

The food necessary to man is as sacred as life itself. Everything that is necessary to the subsistence of the community is common property that belongs to society as a whole. It is only the surplus which may become private property or be given over to traders. Any mercantile speculation that I make at the expense of my fellows is not trade, it is robbery and fratricide.<sup>33</sup>

In the network of associations that had been bequeathed him by Rousseau there were strong links in Robespierre's mind between the evils of commerce, the defence of its principles by *Encyclopédistes* such as Turgot, the patronage of such *philosophes* by eminent nobles, and the selfish greed of the aristocracy as a whole.<sup>34</sup> This led him to question the distinction that bourgeois economists had sought to make between modern *laissez-faire* capitalism and the protectionism of the ancien régime. For it seemed to him that in the new culture of free trade, corporate interests had not been eradicated, they had merely become less visible: aristocratic vices continued to lurk beneath the mask of public patriotism. Thus his allegation that 'fratricidal' sentiments were circulating within the class of *négociants* can be seen to have been based on the fear that the new culture of private enterprise merely perpetuated the corruption of the feudal state. And the fact that some of the leading Girondins did not seem to want to take action against hoarders only served to confirm his growing impression that they were in some way complicit with the defenders of the old order. Indeed as time went on he became progressively more convinced that they were in fact secretly hand-in-glove, both fuelled by selfish greed, and a desire to exploit the misfortunes of 'the people'.

In the struggle between the Jacobins and the Girondins that took place between 1792 and 1793 Robespierre sought to associate Brissot<sup>35</sup> and his associates with the aristocratic corruption of the ancien régime by interpreting their professed admiration of the social and political theories of the *philosophes* as indicative of a continuing connection with court culture. In his analysis, Jean D'Alembert, Denis Diderot, Helvétius and many of the other men of letters of the mid-century had all tried to pass themselves off as men of independence and virtue, but ultimately time had proved them to be mere flatterers of the nobility, *salonniers* fully conniving with the existing order. And what is more, they had made their servility apparent in their persecution of Rousseau, who had recounted their universal conspiracy against him in the pages of his posthumous *Confessions*:

I could observe that the Revolution has made the great men of the ancien régime seem a lot smaller; that if the academicians and mathematicians which Monsieur Brissot offers to us as models did combat and ridicule priests,<sup>36</sup> nevertheless they also courted the nobility, and worshipped kings, from which they gained much advantage, and everybody knows the ferocity with which they persecuted virtue and the spirit of liberty in the person of Jean-Jacques, whose sacred image I see before me, the one true philosopher of that period who merited those public honours which have since been offered only to charlatans and scoundrels.<sup>37</sup>

From 1792 onwards Robespierre was to make much of this link between the Girondins and the *philosophes*. He was to deplore the fact that the Rolandins and Brissotins had abandoned the publicity of the Jacobin club in order to discuss politics in the resolutely private salons of the rich. This confirmed them, in his mind, as 'ambitious courtiers, adroit in the art of deception, who, hiding behind the mask of patriotism, meet frequently with the massed ranks of the aristocracy in order to stifle my voice'.<sup>38</sup> In public, he suggested, the Girondins might wear the mask of patriotism, but in private they were speculating on the possibility of improving their personal fortunes and furthering their political careers. Although they might invoke the principles of liberty and equality, and pay lip-service to the notion of public virtue, their private behaviour showed them to be thorough hypocrites. One of the foremost charges that the Montagnards brought against the Brissotins at their trial in the autumn of 1793 was that they had been 'speculators'. The insinuation was that not only politically but also financially these republican brothers had been 'playing the Revolution like a casino', as

François Furet rather memorably described it. And *spéculation* was doubly reprehensible for Robespierre, in that, as in English, it referred not only to the corrupt practice of gambling in stocks and shares, but also, on a more explicitly political level, to the operations of a resolutely *private* imagination, thus reinforcing the connection that the Jacobins were fond of making between 'progressive' philosophy, bourgeois self-interest and moral corruption.

In his important study, *Class, Ideology and the Rights of Nobles during the French Revolution*, Patrice Higonnet gives a compelling account of the republican phase of the Revolution which does much to explain, and in many ways to support, Robespierre's analysis of the political conduct of the Gironde. He considers that after the flight of the king to Varennes in 1791, any possibility of a lasting entente between liberal nobles and the socially conservative bourgeoisie was effectively ruined. As constitutional monarchy became less of an option, the middle class was driven into an alliance with the people against the aristocracy. In 1791–2 the Girondin faction saw war against Austria and Prussia as a way of binding the 'plebs' to the government and its constitution. In Higonnet's analysis, Brissot and his colleagues constructed the phantom of an aristocratic counter-revolution both inside and outside France as a means of cementing national unity. He considers that their oratory against nobles during this period was 'largely for show', in other words that the nobility was merely a convenient scapegoat for the continuing economic crisis, a way of deflecting the attention of the *sans-culottes* from the problem of subsistence, and of distracting them from their own political agenda. He argues that the Girondins had no intention of acquiescing in the demands of the urban working class for a redistribution of property and for pension schemes for the poor, but they continued to indulge the rhetoric of popular sovereignty in public while courting conservative opinion in private.<sup>39</sup>

While it might be possible to argue that Higonnet seriously underestimates the nature and scale of the counter-revolution at this time, and thereby fails to grasp the very real grounds the Girondins might have had for indulging in anti-aristocratic hysteria, his account of their apparent duplicity is highly illuminating. He sees a gap between their public pronouncements and their private sentiments during this period, arguing that the very fact that their social and domestic movements were slightly less than transparent to the public gaze was enough in itself to arouse the suspicions of many of their former colleagues in the Jacobin club.<sup>40</sup>

What rendered Robespierre immune from such suspicions was that he was known by friends and enemies alike to have no private life. Not only that, but he was also known to have no private *interests*. There was no question of him ever having been guilty of any financial impropriety, as there was with his flamboyant fellow Jacobin Georges Danton, nor of him being intemperate or immoderate in any way. Similarly, there was no question of him having any personal allegiances to interfere with his repeatedly professed devotion to the public good. This was one of the main sources of his prolonged popularity, both in the Jacobin club and the Paris Commune, the mainstays of his power, and in the National Convention, where he remained for a long time a figure of unimpeachable virtue in the eyes of the vast majority of deputies, who remained convinced of his incorruptibility even after he had begun to emerge as a propagandist for terrorist principles. One of the most widely read authorities on the Revolution during the Romantic period, the loyalist historian Lacretelle *jeune*, offers a remarkably vivid, if predictably rather unsympathetic account of the appearance of complete integrity that Robespierre displayed:

He was a man with a single thought, a single passion, a single will; his dark soul never disclosed itself even to his accomplices; as insensible to pleasure as he was to the affections which pass through the hearts of even the purest of men, nothing could distract him from his stubborn pursuit: invariable in his hypocrisy; it was always in the name of virtue that he would invite sedition or provoke a massacre.<sup>41</sup>

Despite his evident mistrust of Robespierre's ultimate intentions, Lacretelle helps to show why he seemed to embody the discourse of public virtue more fully than any of his contemporaries. By adhering doggedly to the logic of the revolutionary catechism, by endlessly pursuing its core values, he was always able to suggest a certain half-heartedness in his opponents' political practice, which is one of the reasons why a detailed study of his writings and speeches can offer such a powerful insight into the political psychology of the Revolution as a whole.<sup>42</sup> As François Furet has most memorably put it: 'Robespierre is an immortal figure not because he reigned supreme over the Revolution for a few months, but because he was the mouthpiece of its purest and most tragic discourse.'<sup>43</sup>

## VI

Having encouraged a high degree of political consciousness in the Paris *sans-culottes* during the first years of the Revolution, it was difficult for the National Convention to cope with the monster it had created. And by 1793 the *enragés* in the Paris sections had become so militant that even the radical deputies of the Mountain were finding them hard to control. Jacques Roux one of the leaders of the popular movement, was to express his dissatisfaction with the 'Jacobin' Constitution of June 1793 in these outspoken terms:

Does it outlaw speculation? No. Have you decreed death for hoarders? No. Have you restricted freedom of trade? No. Well, we must inform you that you have yet to go to the limits of securing happiness for the People. Liberty is no more than a hollow mirage if one class freely can force another into starvation and continue unpunished. Equality is a vain mockery when the rich, through monopoly, can hold powers of literal life and death over their fellows.<sup>44</sup>

A political force of considerable power and autonomy, the *sans-culottes* had an agenda of their own, and it was one with which the bourgeois revolutionaries in the Jacobin club were only partly in sympathy.<sup>45</sup> During the autumn of 1792 Robespierre had attacked the Girondins for employing the language of popular sovereignty without a proper commitment to it. But he himself was always to remain implacably opposed to the systematic redistribution of landed property that was later demanded by some of the leaders of the Paris sections.<sup>46</sup> Despite his apparently radical assertion of the right to subsistence, he was not, finally, a supporter of the *loi agraire*. But the history of the Revolution since 1789 had shown that it was impossible for a bourgeois revolutionary to be seen to resist the will of 'the people', and so in order to disguise his class bias from both the Paris sections and himself, Robespierre was forced to displace his conflict with the *sans-culottes* onto a metaphysical plane. He did this by transforming the Revolution from a campaign to improve living standards into a war of public virtue against private corruption. Billed as a war of the general will against aristocratic conspiracy, the revolutionary Terror of 1793-4 can thus also be seen as an unconscious attempt to flee from the seemingly insoluble conflict that was raging at that time between the relative claims of poverty and property.

In a review in the *Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher* for 1844, Karl Marx criticised the Jacobins' neglect of the social and economic causes of

inequality. According to this view of things, Robespierrist politics was an extreme manifestation of the Aristotelian notion of man as first and foremost a *zoon politikon*.

Far from identifying the principle of the state as the source of social ills, the heroes of the French Revolution held social life to be the source of political problems. Thus Robespierre regarded great wealth and great poverty as an obstacle to pure democracy. He therefore wished to establish a universal system of Spartan frugality.<sup>47</sup>

Implemented in response to the increasingly violent demands of the Paris sections, Robespierre's policy of the *Maximum*, which was instituted on 2 September 1793, was a desperate attempt to guarantee a supply of food to the poor and to eradicate hoarding by fixing the prices of grocery and household items at no more than a third above their level in 1790. It was in many ways the inevitable sequel to his affirmation of the right of subsistence in 1792. However, as soon as the measure was announced, all of the products which it sought to fix were bought up extremely rapidly, creating an immediate shortage. Soon producers were refusing to supply new stock, which set off a fresh wave of accusations about hoarding. In the *Maximum* Marx saw, at one and the same time, the laudable expression of egalitarian values and a complete failure to understand the basic principles of political economy. In his eyes it identified Robespierre in particular as the epitome of the purely political intelligence, a man who existed entirely in the 'imaginary' realm of politics, interpreting economic inequality simply as a failure of the will. And whether one considers it an inept response to the economic problems of the period, or a courageous putting on, in the face of growing popular intimidation, of the harness of revolutionary necessity, this politics of the will was a characteristic of Robespierre's political theory. Indeed it formed the absolute foundation of his justification of revolutionary government, which he was always keen to describe as the product of an active and voluntary policy, rather than a set of desperate and expedient measures.

The first seeds of this new attitude to government were sown in the summer of 1793, when the revolutionary state began to award itself extraordinary new powers designed to expedite not only the formulation and implementation of emergency legislation, but also to bring the apprehension and punishment of counter-revolutionary activists under central control. This process was already well underway by the time Robespierre joined the Committee of Public Safety, but it was left to him and his formidable lieutenant Saint-Just to attempt its theoretical and

moral justification. Rocked by the royalist uprisings in north-western and southern France, and continually harassed by angry allegations from the leaders of the popular movement that the economic situation was being exploited by the speculative practices of the mercantile bourgeoisie, he was eventually driven to cut through the Gordian knot of the revolutionary crisis by representing it as a single battle of wills:

One would say that the two opposing spirits that have been represented in the past as disputing the empire of nature are at this significant moment in human history locked in combat, in order to decide forever the destiny of the world, and that France is the stage of this formidable struggle.<sup>48</sup>

By this means, he transformed economic problems into political problems; and questions of social practice into issues of political conscience. In his hands, the state became less interested in the difficult job of eradicating social injustice in civil society, and much more concerned to pursue the revolutionary struggle in the 'imaginary' realm of politics. In his vision of things, everything that remained opaque to Jacobin political consciousness was re-imagined as a force that was fundamentally inimical to it. The paradoxical suggestion in the *Contrat Social* that those who broke the laws of the state ceased to be entitled to its protection was used to justify a purge of all those *citoyens* who were deemed to have acted in an unpatriotic fashion.<sup>49</sup> As Saint-Just announced to the National Convention on the 10 October 1793:

It is not only the traitors whom you must punish, but also those who are indifferent; you must punish whoever is passive towards the Revolution and does nothing for it. For once the French people have expressed their will, everything that is opposed to it is outside the sovereign body; and everything that is outside the sovereign body is an enemy.<sup>50</sup>

With the infamous 'Law of Suspects' of September 1793, which was passed in the same month as the *Maximum*, this approach was given legislative authority, for it contained a long list of the many ways in which a citizen might render him or herself 'suspect' in the eyes of the government, a list which conflated major crimes such as actively conspiring to overthrow the republic with such vague charges as failing to steadily manifest one's devotion to the Revolution. The immediate consequences of this policy were harrowing, as the English poetess and travel writer Helen Maria Williams made clear, in the course of her vivid eye-witness account of life in Paris during the autumn of 1793:

The prisons became more and more crowded and increasing numbers were every day dragged to the scaffold. *Suspect* was the warrant of imprisonment, and

*conspiracy* was the watchword of murder. One person was sent to prison because aristocracy was written on his countenance; another because it was said to be written in his heart. Many were deprived of liberty because they were rich; others, because they were learned, and most who were arrested enquired their reasons in vain.<sup>51</sup>

This distinctive use of the word 'suspect' is highly characteristic of the Jacobin period, primarily because it seems deliberately intended to provoke fear through its elision of the difference between what it might mean to be suspected of a crime and what it might mean to be guilty of it. It presented the citizens of the First Republic with a stark choice: either to suspect or to be a suspect; it did not appear to recognise the possibility that one might occupy a passive position between the two. Robespierre was always to maintain that good citizens had no reason to be afraid of revolutionary government. As he said to the Convention in his infamous speech on political morality of 5 February 1794: 'The first maxim of your political creed must be to lead the people by reason and the enemies of the people by terror.'<sup>52</sup> But in many ways his language of political terror actually seems to have been designed to call the civic virtue of each and every citizen into doubt, encouraging every man and woman into a potentially endless round of anxious self-questioning, precisely on account of the equation it made between fear and culpability. Transforming denunciation into a kind of revolutionary virtue, it demanded from everyone an active engagement in the cause of liberty, politicising every aspect of social life. But it was also concerned to preserve the execution of revolutionary government as the ultimate prerogative of the committees and tribunals, ensuring that the actual exercise of political terror remained the monopoly of the state.

## VII

In *Representations of Revolution* Ronald Paulson used psychoanalytic theory to shed light on the political culture of the French Revolution. He saw the execution of the king in January 1793 as a revolutionary 'killing of the father' which brought about a collective regression in the French political class back to the stage of primary narcissism. In Paulson's mind, this was linked with another kind of regression practised during the Jacobin period: the adaption of neo-classical models of dress and demeanour. More recently, Dorinda Outram has examined how the bourgeois revolutionaries tried to develop 'stoical' modes of behaviour

in order to try and represent to themselves their newfound political agency. Developing these insights, it might be possible to see the Jacobin period as a kind of historical version of Jacques Lacan's famous 'mirror' stage, that moment in the early life of a child when he or she glimpses its own image in a mirror, and begins to develop a sense of its own subjectivity from the free-standing reflection there contained. The autonomy and agency that the still dependent infant sees in this reflection is entirely and completely imaginary, an unreachable ideal to which it will aspire in vain. Nevertheless, Lacan argues, it is only by identifying with this image that the child begins to construct the fiction of an independent self, without which he cannot function as an active human being.<sup>53</sup>

For the children of the French Revolution what was glimpsed in the mirror of political theory was the realm of pure politics; and the image contained within it was the figure of the public man, a conception at once at once inspiring and terrifying, inspiring in its ideal embodiment of freedom and autonomy, terrifying in its remorseless exposure of private weakness and personal dependency. For this reason the image of the public man with which the revolutionaries identified was to take on the ambivalence of the famous *doppelgänger* or 'double', eloquently described by Sigmund Freud in his much-quoted essay on 'The Uncanny'. Anticipating Lacan, Freud interpreted this double, or mirror-image of the self, as a product of the primary stage of narcissism, seeing it as a figure that could be seen to offer 'an insurance against the destruction of the ego', and thus a kind of 'assurance of immortality', but which was always capable of transforming itself, after that stage had been surmounted, into an uncanny 'harbinger of death'. Thus despite its initial appearance as a guarantee of individual autonomy, the double, in Freud's terms, always had the potential of becoming a terrifying figure of accusation and retribution.<sup>54</sup>

To some extent, this dynamic provides a model for thinking about the Jacobin illusion of politics, which it might be helpful to regard as a kind of 'double' of social reality, an alternative universe of transparent and voluntary action, acting as a kind of dangerous adjunct to the recalcitrant, reluctant realm of everyday civil society, at once its professed protector and its potential persecutor. But it might also be seen to elucidate Robespierre's role within the frame of the revolutionary drama, most specifically as the figure in whom the terrifying ambivalence of the public man was most powerfully present, a statesman who was for many

of his political contemporaries a kind of assurance of immortality, before his eventual metamorphosis into an uncanny harbinger of death. In her seminal work *On Revolution* Hannah Arendt found the source of this doubling and splitting in the very pages of the *Contrat Social*. In her eyes, it was Rousseau's fundamentally dialectical definition of civic virtue that led the revolutionaries to set themselves on the path to self-destruction. For he had suggested that in order to become a true citizen of the main body politic each particular man would have to rise against himself in his own particularity, thinking that it was only by this means that he would arouse in himself his own antagonist, the general will. Effectively, she reasoned, this meant that in the realm of his political theory, to partake in citizenship 'each national must rise and remain in constant rebellion against himself'.<sup>55</sup>

In the bitter struggle between the Jacobins and the Girondins which took place after the institution of the First Republic in 1792, this tendency towards self-division at the heart of revolutionary discourse expressed itself in terms of recurrent rhetoric of paradox. During this period of republican in-fighting, both factions showed themselves to be assiduous practitioners of the 'revolutionary catechism', adopting diametrically opposed positions for identical reasons, which meant they found themselves employing a language that was often merely an echo of that of their antagonists. True patriotism was always being faced by its masked counterfeit, as Robespierre told the Girondins in November 1792:

Thus, you only speak of dictatorship in order to exercise it yourself without restraint, you only speak of proscriptions and tyranny in order to tyrannise and proscribe.<sup>56</sup>

Such formulations were to become a leading characteristic of the language of revolutionary government, which both feared and fed upon the possibility that there might be an intimate link between apparent opposites. History had taught the Jacobins that what had seemed a united front against counter-revolution was always capable of dividing against itself, as the revolutionary movement suffered a succession of supposed 'betrayals' from within its own ranks, firstly from the *feuillants*, then from the Brissotins, and then finally, in the early part of 1794, from both the Dantonists and the so-called *ultras*. Betrayal was the recurrent nightmare of the First Republic, but it also became its energising principle. The suspicion that people and principles might be subject to uncanny reversals, and that patriotism might turn out to be its opposite, helped to fuel the

policy of the Terror, but not without repeatedly calling the good faith of its own practitioners into question.

Defending the Terror from the charge that it merely reproduced the repression of the ancien régime, Robespierre gave an extended speech on 'political morality' in February 1794 in which he offered a striking formulation which sought to make an absolute distinction between the two:

The government of the Revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny.<sup>57</sup>

It is likely that Edmund Burke had this type of statement in mind when he said of the French nation in his *Letters on the Regicide Peace* that 'the foundation of their Republic is laid in moral paradoxes', and the temptation for historians has always been to share his rather scornful view. But while it is of course important to acknowledge the deleterious historical consequences of this language of paradox, it is also worth recognising the way in which, like the vocabulary of suspicion mentioned above, it was a canny instrument of political terror. It was a powerful device because it forced its auditors into an active exploration of the distinction between revolutionary government and the absolutism of the ancien régime in a way that made any confusion between the two seem a culpable failure of political understanding, for as Robespierre argued: 'Those who . . . call the revolutionary laws arbitrary or tyrannical are stupid sophists who seek to confuse total opposites.'<sup>58</sup> Like Rousseau, he suggested that those readers who found such statements impossible were almost certainly thinking too much, and in the wrong kind of way; a paradox, after all, was just another word for a new truth, a truth which had not yet become part of the general orthodoxy.

However, even as Robespierre's paradoxical rhetoric laboured to establish the absolute difference between republicanism and aristocracy, it also preserved the possibility of their secret proximity. Unconsciously, it presented them as brothers as well as opposites. And in the extended analysis of the nature of counter-revolutionary conspiracy which formed a central part of the 'political morality' speech, Robespierre went on to explore this fratricidal link, almost in spite of himself. Initially, he tried to strike an upbeat note. Such was the success of the republican movement, he argued, that no longer did anybody dare to broadcast aristocratic principles. Unfortunately, however, this did not mean that aristocracy had been totally eradicated; it simply meant that it had been forced to take up the mask of patriotism, mimicking republican discourse in an attempt to subvert it from within. Sometimes they had

sought to dilute revolutionary zeal, as the Dantonists had done; sometimes, as in the case of the Hébertists, they had urged it to self-destructive excess. In each case true republicans had been temporarily seduced by the mere performance of patriotism, but they would know to be more watchful in future:

In treacherous hands, all of the remedies to our ills will become poisons; everything that you are capable of doing, they will turn against you; even the truths that we have just put forward.<sup>59</sup>

Obsessed by counter-revolution, and yet increasingly unable to distinguish it from itself, in this formulation revolutionary discourse becomes prey to a form of self-distrust. Thus it became crucial for Robespierre to argue that the real difference between the despotism of liberty against tyranny and its absolute opposite lay in the inner intentions lying behind them, precisely because they were so identical in their effects. Hence he sought repose in the notion of the conscience as the only real proof of virtue, a deeply internal principle, existing anterior to both political language and political praxis, outside the realm of conventional representation. And this is why it is tempting to see his later speeches in terms of an identifiably Rousseauvian tradition of confession, for as he said on the day preceding the Thermidorean conspiracy against him: 'Take my conscience away from me, and I would be the most unhappy of men'.<sup>60</sup>